

ALEXANDER BROOK



AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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ALEXANDER BROOK

BY

EDWARD ALDEN JEWELL



AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

TEN WEST EIGHTH STREET • NEW YORK

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FOREWORD

THIS book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.

For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish gratefully to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Downtown Gallery for information regarding paintings used for illustration, to The Arts magazine for the loan of its files of photographs, and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*
Whitney Museum of American Art



ALEXANDER BROOK

ALEXANDER BROOK

BY

EDWARD ALDEN JEWELL

ONE of the best of our younger American painters, Alexander Brook has accomplished much in his short career. "Due to an illness at the age of twelve," he tells us, "I was deprived of the use of my legs for several months"; and "it was at this time that I asked for some paints with which to amuse myself." That must have been about 1910, in case one chooses to consider it the beginning of Brook's career as an artist. But it was five years later that he took up painting seriously, at the Art Students' League. In, roughly, fifteen years, Alexander Brook has become a formidable prize-winner. This might mean much and it might mean little, since prizes aren't always distributed from Olympus. In Brook's case I think the winning of important prizes need not be looked upon as a calamity. He has put himself well beyond a jury's power to harm; is even, thanks wholly to his own efforts, in a position to help juries maintain a pleasant sort of dignity. For Brook has produced more than just prize-winning pictures. He has produced a style.

We are ever challenged by the problem of an artist's style. "What is style?" we ask, tormenting ourselves with a question that too frequently leads into mistiness and confusion. Alexander Brook is not, as we commonly employ the terms, a realist, an abstractionist, a romanticist, an intellectualist, a purist. And yet in his work you will find realism, so far as appropriate fidelity to form is concerned; abstraction, to the extent of intelligent simplification; the intellectual approach, if a habit of clear reasoning be implied; purity in the articulation of color; while everything he does is suffused with the romantic and humorous spirit of the explorer who doesn't pretend to omniscience regarding what lies ahead. Of all these and other elements style is compounded. However, the loaf

will not rise without the yeast of personality. Is such yeast an ingredient?

It is in the quality of an artist's transcribing "not the world," as Pater says, "but his sense of it," that we must look for style in the work of any artist. So far as Alexander Brook is concerned, he delighted me the other day by confessing that he is never sure that he has any "style" at all. This, I thought, is fine. This is as it should be. For so many of the greatest masters in painting, sculpture, music, literature seem to have had the same gnawing doubts. Because Mr. Brook is intent, with enthusiasm and freshness, upon communicating, not objective facts but rather his own sense of them (which constitutes subjectivity), his work has style, just as has that of Strindberg or Renan or Stravinsky or Lehmbruck or Redon. But beyond this somewhat departicularized observation may be detected the creed of a genuine individualist. Brook's style is found to be absolutely unique. Yes indeed, the yeast of personality is there. An advertisement, read recently over the shoulders of a subway jam, runs like this: "Be yourself and you'll be in fashion." The issue as transferred from clothes to art is possibly more complex than it seemed at first in the subway; but by substituting "on the side of the angels" for "in fashion," we may find that we have made progress in "placing" Alexander Brook.

If we turn now to more specific consideration, we are, to begin with, impressed with the artist's healthy exuberance. Seeking an image that may embrace this quality, we envision, patly enough, a table "groaning," as the phrase has it, with plenty. Before the portraits, considerably before the landscapes, certain lush still-lives come to mind: canvases such as *The Intruder*, or *Children's Luncheon* in the Chicago Art Institute. These and similar pieces may, it is true, expose themselves to the criticism that opulence has lured the artist into over-diffused, insufficiently disciplined statement. And yet they are such honest pictures, revealing whole-hearted response to invitations that pour in from a world prodigal of gifts. Besides, Mr. Brook, impelled by an instinct that partakes at its core of something akin to austerity, has evidenced, in other work, a desire to

school exuberance to more reticent expression. For instance, in still-lives such as the handsome pair called *Bouquet* and *Midsummer Bouquet*, or in the lovely *Bridalwreath and Japonica*, extravagance of the all-over pattern gives place to a marshalling of resources that yields greater repose to the eye and argues a mind more fully in command. The same urge toward more frugal or more finely integrated architecture is perceived in the *Broken Vase* owned by Miss Rebecca Jones.

Even at its most ornate, the art of Alexander Brook does not hint at actual slavery to subject. There is usually a sense of happy improvisation; an impulse to make the most of chance; a fluent capacity for bending what is fortuitous to the heart's desire. One day he bought some red crêpe paper to use with a bit of still-life. A strip of this paper was pinned, neatly panel-wise, behind a table containing flowers and fruit. While Brook was out, a storm swept in at the windows. One of the fastenings came loose, and when he returned the panel of red had fluttered all awry. Instantly the artist saw that wind, lusty conspirator, had whipped his picture into shape for him. The whole arrangement had taken on a new and exciting look, unpremeditated and precious.

Here is an attitude of mind that blithely skirts all that is academic and bleakly formal. We encounter it again and again. Before putting down these notes I visited Brook's New York studio. There I found a recent still-life, done in 1930; a simple affair, quite unlike the elaborate earlier pieces. It contains a spray of green (the tip of a young pine), a tall whitish vase, a brown shape (of which more in a moment), a bit of crumpled cloth, and, off to the right, a couple of pears. Brook told me how the picture had grown. In the first place, he didn't sit down before any completely organized group, although the projected composition was clear enough in his mind. He nailed the pine plume to his table and propped against it, diagonally, a plain brown Manila envelope. The empty vase, occupying a commanding position, was enlarged, as he worked, to two or three times the size of the original. The cloth, which in its cascading

holds the design together, was not really there at all—pure fabrication. Above the envelope, the rim of another (an imaginary) vase was indicated, since the green plume's music seemed, now one debated the matter, to need some such confining phrase. But it is the humble Manila envelope that really supplies an O. Henry ending. What Brook says he wanted at this point in the composition was "a brown color with thickness." The envelope sketchily suggested a surface and his versatile brush did all that the metamorphosis required. What resulted was an indeterminate yet perfectly convincing brown object. What it might be matters not at all. It "functions." Here is even "significant form," with a new significance. Thus was the picture built, a marriage of improvisation and precise logic.

This still-life, upon which, no doubt, disproportionate attention has been spent, is important, it seems to me, on two counts: it indicates, in quite dramatic form, the refinement that has taken place in the artist's affection for rococo; also, by virtue of its zestful ingenuity, it promises no end of profitable future adventuring. And after all, Alexander Brook interests us more as an artist with a future than as one who has achieved.

In general, his landscapes, though many of them have been excellent, provide less brilliantly original material for analysis. They do, however, invariably emphasize a grasp of compositional values. In the realm of portraiture, progress has reported a coming to grips with the essentials of character as well as with the more austere problems of construction. Brook has gone a long way indeed since the merry and whimsical days of *Petit Déjeuner* (1922 or 1923) and the most youthful of the self-portraits. Later Brook began to feel his way from whimsicality and gentle lyric wit to robuster treatment; to a more vigorous play of lights and darks. This adumbrated a flair for the dramatic, which was destined to break through into expression much subtler, without sacrifice of the prime attributes of subjective drama. The first-fruits of this deeper seeing appear in a series of self-portraits. I am pretty confident that Brook

doesn't sit brooding by the hour over his pictures; doesn't spend days and months torturing his soul about the profound inevitability each integrating stroke of the brush must convey; yet the outcome of his labors often reveals a finely concentrated force of simplified statement.

This is not the place for cataloguing, but one would like to mention a few other portraits, interesting in themselves and because, again, they sponsor arrows pointing toward the future. There is the *Raphael Soyer*, quite impressively psychological; there is the entertaining *Eva and Kitten*, belonging to Mr. Armand W. Riley; there is the *Girl with Flower*. Then we have those delightful studies of the artist's children: *Biddy and Sandy* and *Belinda with Skipping Rope*, the latter in Brook's new smooth and restrained yet eloquently revealing technique.

But of the several portraits, the one I like best so far is that of George Biddle, painted in 1929 and now in the collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. There he sits, with his flute, one leg comfortably twined about the other—miles removed from so-called "realism," yet how compellingly real! The human equation (fashionably slighted in so much of our modern art) here finds a redoubtable, albeit far from solemn, champion; Brook proves that he can do a thing like this without becoming sentimentally representational. Two personalities, sitter and creator, live for us. On the technical side, the painting is superb. All in all it is one of those genial, lovable, fully "realized" portraits that seem prepared, because of sheer innate goodness, to meet posterity on its own ground.

The Biddle portrait is rewarding besides, thanks to the authenticity of its humor. Indeed, running all through the art of Alexander Brook is humor, as a rule implicit rather than assertive. Sometimes it seems quaintly, at the eleventh hour, tacked on, in a still-life like *The Intruder* (this intruder is a little mouse). In a composition called *Bouquet* he isn't laughing, exactly, at the taste of "dear dead days beyond recall"; in fact, though too young to know very much at first hand about the Victorians,

Brook rather leans toward them, more than politely respecting their good points; but we may seem to detect humor, none the less, in this machine age archaeological zeal that can linger so lovingly over dried grasses or the scallops of an ornate vase. Such humor is part of the painter's style, which, as I have tried to suggest, embodies personality to a high degree and binds the various elements into coherent expression with artistry more and more sure of itself as the years add spiritual wisdom, stature, and poise.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

ALEXANDER BROOK was born in Brooklyn, New York, July 14th, 1898. In 1915 he began to study at the Art Students' League of New York. The four years he remained a student in that institution he was awarded a scholarship and other honors. His instructors at the League were John C. Johansen, Frank Vincent Du Mond, George Bridgman, Dimitri Romanofski, and for two years, Kenneth Hayes Miller. In 1922 he exhibited jointly with his wife, Peggy Bacon. Since that time his work has been shown in New York at various galleries in a succession of one-man exhibitions. In 1929 he had a retrospective exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. For several seasons he was Assistant Director of the Whitney Studio Club. During the winter he lives in New York City and in the summer at Cross River, New York.

He is the author of a number of reviews and articles on art and kindred subjects.

His work has been shown in most of the important national and international exhibitions in this country and he is the recipient of the following awards and honors: The Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan medal and purchase prize, 42nd Annual Exhibition, Chicago Institute, Chicago, Ill., 1929; Second Prize and Albert C. Lehman award and purchase prize, 29th International Exhibition, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1930; Temple Gold Medal, 126th Annual Exhibition, Pennsylvania Academy, Philadelphia, Pa., 1931; Fellowship in Painting, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1931.

He is represented in many private collections and in the following public museums: The Gallery of Living Art, New York, N. Y.; the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N. Y.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

G I R L W I T H F L O W E R, 1930

h. 34 inches w. 26 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art

G. B. Smith
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PINE BRANCH, 1930
H. 30 inches w. 24 inches



GEORGE BIDDLE PLAYING THE FLUTE, 1929

H. 40 inches W. 30 inches

Collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., New York



THE RED JACKET, 1929

H. 20 inches W. 16 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art



RAPHAEL SOYER. 1929

H. 71 inches w. 36 inches



I N T E R I O R, 1 9 2 9

H. 60 inches W. 36 inches

Collection of Mr. Albert C. Lehman, Pittsburgh, Pa.



BELINDA WITH SKIPPING ROPE, 1930

H. 40 inches W. 24 inches



THE CHILDREN'S LUNCH, 1928

h. 35½ inches w. 40¼ inches

Collection of Art Institute of Chicago



SLEEPING GIRL, 1929
H. 36 inches W. 30 inches
*Collection of Mr. Louis E. Stern
Atlantic City, N. J., and New York*



INTERIOR, 1928
H. 36 inches W. 30 inches



STANDING FIGURE, 1929

H. 35 inches W. 24 inches

Collection of Mrs. Harry F. Evans, Davenport, Iowa



BIDDY AND SANDY, 1928

H. 36 inches W. 28 inches

Collection of Mrs. Howell Howard, Dayton, Ohio



THE YELLOW FAN, 1930

H. 30 inches W. 36 inches

Collection of Mr. Edward W. Root, Clinton, N.Y.



HAUNTED HOUSE, 1929

H. 30 inches W. 36 inches

*Collection of Hamilton Easter Field Art Foundation
Brooklyn, N. Y.*



BROKEN PITCHER, 1930

H. 11 inches w. 18 inches

Collection of Downtown Gallery, New York



CROWS, 1928
H. 16 inches W. 28 inches

Private collection



GRAPES AND PEACHES, 1924

H. 20 inches W. 24 inches

Collection of Gallery of Living Art, New York University



THE INTRUDER, 1926
H. 40 inches W. 36 inches



BOUQUET, 1926
H. 20 inches W. 36 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art



SELF PORTRAIT, 1919

H. 20 inches W. 16 inches


Collection of Mrs. C. R. Bacon



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